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ABSTRACT

The role of the teacher in the open classroom, which depends on human intelligence and feeling more than on anything else, is viewed as especially important at a time when powerful attempts are being made to reduce teachers to insignificance by providing them with foolproof packaged teaching materials. In order to function in an open classroom, teachers must recognize their own worth and refuse to accept the stereotype of the incompetency of public school teachers. Of prime importance in the open classroom is the capacity of the teacher for using judgment in making and retracting decisions and in assessing what the teacher and children are in need of learning. The teacher does not hesitate to show her feelings, within socially acceptable bounds, and accepts the feelings of children as well. In the open classroom, the teacher organizes the room for productive interaction of people with each other and with materials and ideas. The teacher herself must be a learner in order to stimulate learning. Evaluation begins and continues with the teacher's perceptions, and the process as well as the end product of a child's learning is evaluated. Finally, the role of the teacher involves interaction with colleagues in establishing a school climate of which her classroom is a part. (MS)

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# THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN THE INFORMAL CLASSROOM

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Good teachers have at all times and in all settings brought intellectual vigor, empathy, fairness, and often humor to their teaching. As we speak of the role of the teacher in the informal classroom today, let us not disassociate ourselves from what was good in the past as though we are speaking of a completely new phenomenon born full-blown out of a sudden insight in Great Britain. It is not at all necessarily true that with the "open" classroom we will be creating all good learning environments, whereas we used to have all bad ones. Good and bad in education do not follow from the name of the game, but from how it is played.

Nevertheless, the role of the teacher in the open school is not the same as that of the teacher in the traditional school. In important ways the two are even antithetical. But we would be fooling ourselves if we believed that the role of the teacher in the open school is so unrelated to good teaching practice of all time as to be unrecognizable.

Social necessity dictates the need for a change in children's education, and this in turn calls for a change in the role of the teacher. But change must take into consideration internal continuity and development of the profession on the one hand, and the relationship between an educational mode and the period in which it is shaped on the other. The present concept of informal education must therefore be examined with attention to continuity within our professional history so as not to lose any of its potential depth; and it must also be perceived in relation to the social problems of our time so as not to miss any of its implications. Failure to understand the breadth and depth of the changes called for is to court superficiality and verbalism, something which neither children nor teachers must tolerate any longer.

Two kinds of development relevant to the changing role of the teacher call for long-overdue attention. One is the knowledge about children's growth and learning that has been accruing for the last hundred years or so at a more rapid rate than in centuries before and to which established educational practice is only barely beginning to pay lip service. The other is the world proliferation of knowledge, which makes it impossible to be dogmatic or righteous about any specific curriculum for school children. The first causes some educators to confuse sentimentality with insight. The second

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causes some educators attracted to open schooling to avoid any kind of thinking or planning at all about content, while both cause conservative educators to wail loudly about the security of the glorious past when teachers knew what they were doing and children knew what was expected of them.

To grow knowledgeable enough about child development and curriculum content so as to relate them to each other and to the contemporary scene would be a challenge to the teaching profession as it now functions even under the most benigh of circumstances. To do so today is particularly difficult as well as particularly necessary because of the contradictory directions proffered by the social and political situation in which education now finds itself. We live in a time when large-scale organization of society has depersonalized life to a point where the meaningfulness of individuals and small groups is hard to maintain, and where the right of individuals and small groups to influence their lives grows harder to exercise. The pace-setters of our time, whose major objective appears to be efficiency in the service of profit, have unfortunately turned their attention to the schools, as they did in earlier periods too. They are once again offering us models of precision machinery as substitutes for the unpredictability, trial-and-error learning, capacity for reflection, and range of feeling of the not-so-precise human beings who become teachers. To the economy-minded, efficiency of operation is a far more meaningful term than fulfillment of human potential, even when the reference is to children.

In the face of such trends, a fresh focus on the humanity of pupils and teachers, combined with a critical analysis of what is to be understood and changed in the interests of humanity in a changing world, is of far-reaching importance in educational, national, and perhaps even world history. Ours is the responsibility of educating a future citizenry that will understand what it means to maintain and extend the democratic ideas that give value to individuals and small groups. This has been said before in education, but it must be said again, and with fresh impetus, because its meaning is crucial and pivotal to the future: the distance between the sources of power and the people is growing too vast. The bridging of that distance is being fought by an engineering mentality that places efficiency and economy of operation above human need and concern, largely because it does not trust the potential of the human mind, especially its potential to ask questions. Such an engineering mentality would reduce teachers to insignificance by "foolproofing" the teacher's performance. The same mentality seems equally pleased for children to become as hollow as television cartoon characters.

Thus we are discussing the role of the teacher in the open classroom, which depends on human intelligence and feeling more than on anything else, at a time when powerful attempts are being made to inundate children's learning environments with such relable materials that, so the theory goes, the most inept teacher will not upset their learning.

So, while it may seem obvious to us all, it must nevertheless be stated at the outset that at the heart of the concept of the open classroom is the living teacher, a thinking, feeling, exploring, sometimes fumbling, always questioning, deeply committed-to-children human being.

Although the tradition of the live teacher is historically ours, that tradition is so overlaid within the profession by outmoded attitudes that if these are not uprooted, we will be in no position to develop more flexibly conceived classrooms and we may yet be at the mercy of the efficiency experts.

First for us to consider is the heritage of a wholly inadequate and distorted perception of children, whom even kind and loving teachers still see as scores or grades somewhat more than as whole children for whom all kinds of factors affect learning. Second to consider is the still strong belief in the infallibility and finality of a sequential group of skills and assumed facts called "subjects," especially when these appear in authoritative syllabi. Deeply immersed as teachers and administrators now are in the values of the system they want to change, they are far more vulnerable than they realize to the false promises of efficiency via mechanical solutions. Far more than they realize, they still seek a package deal, a safe and surefire way of getting into open education, a formula that will not be called a formula, at the very least, a set of rules that will surely work. In their assumption that there must be an easy way, such educators are denying the complexity of the task and the seriousness of the struggle. Paradoxically, the very effort to systematize flexibility and openness, to insure predictable and certain results, to create a simple "do-this-and-this-will-happen" educational mode bypasses the goal of open education by a wide margin. The efforts to systematize are so at odds with the philosophy of open education that the concept is destroyed before it even gets off the ground. A return to the earlier emphasis on the live teacher will clarify the reasons why this is so.

If we could speak of one thing that most qualifies the role of the teacher in an open classroom, it is the capacity for using judgment, judgment in making decisions, in retracting decisions, and in assessing what the teacher and the children are in need of learning as a constant element in their lives. For example, it takes judgment to resolve social conflict so as to strengthen moral behavior, to make on the spot decisions, to know when to intervene and when to let the children struggle. It takes judgment to choose from among the many options in curriculum or to recognize a teachable moment. It takes judgment to decide on priorities and balances for many different individuals and to guide the selection of materials appropriate to their choices. But there is no package one can buy labeled <u>Good Judgment</u>. It is a human capacity that can neither be computerized nor systematized. It is the total integrated capacity of a mature human being to think and to feel rather than a set of courses or a set of specific characteristics like "warmth" or "a sense of humor," important as these still are.

Judgment has always been a most significant item in any good teacher's repertoire, but it is an indispensable item in the repertoire of the teacher in an open classroom. The reason is that the role revolves around an axis of teacher with child and child with teacher, of child with child and children with children, of children and teacher with materials and ideas. Into this interactive base is fed the content that gives the axis meaning. From this base of interaction grow the organization and routine that support a learning environment that is alive and growing. There is nothing mysterious or unmanageable about this, although the shift from traditional teacher management and control of preset curriculum to interaction with children, in which the teacher does not cease to be a teacher and in which learning is a truly intellectual experience, is hard to grasp and work out at first. It begins with teachers giving up their stereotypes and learning to be open to children and open to ideas in order that children will be encouraged to be open to people and open to ideas. That is what the open classroom is about, and while openness to people and ideas was always a part of a really good teacher's classroom, it must now become a more inclusive and sophisticated version if it is to be suitable to the complex times in which we live.

There is no model. The role cannot be methodically reproduced or imitated.

The vital force is a creative, flexible, and intelligent response to developing situations as these involve people and ideas. It is not laissez faire and it is not amorphous. There is, and there must be structure; there are, and there must certainly be, boundaries. But the structure serves the possibilities for openness, and the boundaries are flexible. Both are subject to analysis and change as the requirements of the learning demand change.

The strength of the teacher's role is completely and wholly related to the teacher's perception of herself as an adult, so that in a real sense, teachers will have to grow up if they are to function in open classrooms. They must reject at long last the insulting and humiliating nonsense on the part of those administrators, educational psychologists, and text book and materials manufacturers who presume that teachers are too stupid to know what to do unless a plan of action is carefully laid out for them in easy steps. Before they can function independently, teachers, of whom approximately 70% in the elementary schools are still women, must debunk the popular assumption on the part of largely masculine leadership that educational materials need to be created primarily for the purpose of thwarting the natural ineptitude of teachers.

The fact that the teaching profession has put up with such contempt and snobbery for as long as it has must be related to the low esteem in which teaching has long been held. (Remember the disparagement: "Those who can, do; those who cannot, teach.") But since women were allowed to become teachers of young children in large numbers, it must also be related to the secondary position women have been in for

centuries. Any doubt about this dual truth is quickly dispelled by a look at a phenomenon of the last decade. The day early childhood became financially rewarding and societally prestigious as a result of the political and social pressures that loosened government funds, men discovered it. They also ignored pretty completely the serious, careful work of scores of women over decades and quickly began to gloat over their discoveries and voice opinions like true authorities to large numbers of early childhood teachers to whom many of those findings were often old hat or sadly lacking in supportive evidence.

So when I speak of teachers at last growing up, I have in mind the fact that the average elementary school teacher, who is female, is too often cowed and insecure, expects to be told what to do, and looks to be told. But teachers who cannot trust themselves or their intelligence cannot develop open classrooms. Open classrooms can never come about by fiat from above, which is the way most innovations and changes in American schools have hitherto been introduced and which is why there is always room for a new panacea. But each open classroom must be built by the teacher and the children in it. This does not mean a reversal of the familiar teacher domination and control to domination and control by the child. The teacher does not abdicate the role of the adult in the process of altering her role as teacher.

One must immediately differentiate between teachers using judgment and their passing judgment, even when the latter preaches human relations and mental health. Administration has passed judgment on teachers, and teachers in turn on children for too long. Far too often, that judgment has been negative and punitive. As a result, how many of us who become teachers still know all too well the feelings of inadequacy, of uncertainty about our capacities and talents that well-intentioned teachers inculcated in us as they judged our childhood struggles by arbitrary, unrealistic standards of achievement locked into rigid guidelines for the given months of a given grade? Yet the teacher in the open classroom does not give up the responsibility for evaluating and assessing children's learning by ceasing to pass judgment. Her thrust is rather toward diagnosis and support of growth, not for condemnation and tracking.

How then does it all happen?

## The Social and Emotional Climate

Because we value people, big ones and little ones, let us begin with the quality of the emotional and social climate created by the teacher in an open classroom.

The teacher, knowing and feeling herself a person, does not put on the teacher's hat of yesteryear. Neither her posture nor her voice take on the special look and tone of the person-in-charge, of the all-knowing, superior authority. Giving up the air of superiority does

not, however, mean giving up the leadership implicit in adult-child relationships. Children feel safer when they know an adult is willing to assume the responsibility for their well-being, can be ounted on to take care of what they find too difficult, and is trustworthy in a psychological as well as physical sense. Children need and appreciate an adult whose judgment is in their interest, who is fair and who is kind. In such a climate mistakes are valued as part of learning, for teacher and children alike.

The teacher in the open classroom is an authority, but in the most far-reaching sense. She knows more than the children, and she has access to resources the children cannot dream of. She is impartial in a way that children cannot yet be, and so she is the guarantor of justice for everyone.

The teacher in the open classroom is not authoritarian, however. Her power is not drawn from status, from the ruler in her hand or the backing of the principal down the hall. Her power is in the children's dependency on her, and she does not abuse that power. She respects children and she asks for respect in turn.

Let me quote what Bertrand Russell had to say about the authority of a teacher in his Principles of Social Reconstruction:

> Where authority is unavoidable, what is needed is reverence. A man who is to educate really well and is to make the young grow and develop into their full stature must be filled through and through with reverence....The man who has reverence will not think it his duty to "mold" the young....The outward helplessness of the child and the appeal of dependence make him conscious of the responsibility of a trust. His imagination shows him what the child may become, for good or evil, how its impulses may be developed or thwarted; how its hopes must be dimmed and the life in it grow less living, how its trust will be bruised and its quick desires replaced by brooding will. All this gives him a longing to help the child in its own battle; he would equip and strengthen it, not for some outside end proposed by the State or any other impersonal authority, but for the ends for which the child's own spirit is obscurely seeking. The man who feels this can wield the authority of an educator without infringing the principle of liberty.

By contrast, note the tone of disrespect for the intelligence and feelings of teachers and pupils in the following unit of competency training distributed to an elementary school staff. I quote:

> Procedure for movement in hallways, stairwells, and in street during trips

1. Active teacher involvement--position yourself in middle of class line.
2. Movement of short distances--wait for next teacher's direction.
3. Close lines--avoid gaps between children.
4. Tight control--minimum noise, etc.

Preparation of roll book

1. Cover roll book
2. Keep at school at all times. Leave in locked desk drawer.
3. Insert pupil information--names, addresses, etc. List names alphabetically--boys pages 6-7, girls pages 30-31.

And so on.

Why would anyone think that that level of minutia and that tone of command are necessary to acquaint educated people with the most ordinary of social and clerical practices? Do teachers need to be told, "...Insert the children's names and addresses," or, "Cover your roll book?"

No, the relationship crested by the teacher in the open classroom is one of people-to-people trust and honesty. It is non-manipulative, non authoritarian; it is respectful and it is by common consent. Children can understand the reasons for social controls when they are really for the social good and not for the satisfaction of a petty tyrant or the arbitrary perpetuation of habit. Children learn to value group controls when their individual needs are considered and the possibilities for functioning in a group are thoughtfully supported. They do not necessarily arrive at this state of maturity by wishful thinking, and the teacher helps them to learn. But she does not condemn them for their immaturity.

The teacher in the open classroom does not hesitate to show her feelings, within socially acceptable bounds; but by the same token, she accepts the feelings of children and asks that they be within socially acceptable bounds too. The false sweetness of the well-modulated voice of the traditional teacher often concealed anger and resentment in both teacher and child and was neither honest nor open. Where respect has the chance to flourish, it can even lead to affection. The occasional outburst of distress or anger of teacher or child is hardly a matter of concern in such a climate. As in a family, the more lasting impressions of sincerity and honest attempts at communication, if these exist, will absorb the difficulties of relating that are bound to occur when human beings are in close contact with each other over time. But the teacher must be mature enough to withstand the normal immaturities of children and not be seduced into childish behavior herself.

Organization Is Essential

The teacher in the informal classroom is an enabler and expeditor. She organizes the room for productive interaction of people with each other and with materials and ideas. The physical structure and layout of a room thus supports its ideology. Where does the teacher stand or sit? Where do the children sit? Whom do they face? As transitions are made to learning centers, teachers must ask whether some children still need their own desks or tables, and who are the children who can use learning centers comfortably. Space must be made available for individuals to work alone and to feed into group projects.

Together, teacher and children decide who will do what and for how long. Many children will need to be taught to do for themselves, even as teachers must learn the same thing. Children must be taught to use judgment, even as teachers must use it. And children must be held responsible for their decisions once they are involved in the decision-making, just as teachers are.

We know that skill learning follows an individual pace, and the teacher, as leader of the curriculum development, must provide for such individual learning as well as for whole-group projects. The interaction of individual and group on every level of relating, intellectual, social, and physical, must be provided for in the teacher's structuring of time and space, in the focus for activity that the teacher makes possible.

In providing for meaningful curriculum in terms of individual children, areas of learning have to be restimulated so as to be reflective and supportive of constant learning, without being overstimulating. Materials have to be ordered, created, and stored. Arrangements for their use have to be made and remade, down to the details of having paint jars filled, pencils sharpened, and other supplies available. The open classroom tolerates the ambiguity and incompleteness of process in the important areas of thought and feeling. But the practical implementations for work cannot be either ambiguous or incomplete. If you can't find a pencil, you can't write a fine story!

The planning, structuring, and focusing must of course relate to content. The day of the right answer must go. For example, we were all taught that there were nine planets, and we memorized their names. But we do not really know now how many planets there are, and that edge of uncertainty of what we know must be incorporated into the search for knowledge in school. We cannot predict that wars will always occur, because they are anachronistic in our one-world stage of communication and technology, and other ways must be found, or we will destroy ourselves. We cannot teach that technology will find the answer to everything, because the cost of total reliance on technology has been a threatening depletion of resources, and we really do not know what will be the best solutions for common human problems of survival or existence.

Content and Inquiry

Much of what children must learn in order to live in this world is already known to the teacher. But in an open classroom, a great deal of the learning will be new for the teacher, too. In the exploration of areas unknown to teacher and children, the teacher must take the lead in tracking down resources and information by virtue of being better prepared to take the initiative. Only then can she involve children in the search with a truly inquiring mind. But she must herself be a learner to stimulate learning.

There must be time to think, time to plan for both teacher and children, sometimes separately, sometimes together. Contrary to the traditional role of the teacher, for whom the syllabus defined the limits of planning, the teacher in the open classroom plans far more independently and inclusively than traditional teachers ever did. Knowing children well in a scholarly way as well as with intuitive responses, the teacher in the open classroom takes individual differences and needs very seriously, plans for them, and acts upon them. Knowing how open-ended are the boundaries of knowledge, she approaches the selection of content very thoughtfully. In bringing awareness of children's stage of growth and learning style into contact with the possibilities that can be explored in the world of intellect and esthetics, she makes decisions that will provide the kind of learning environment we call the open classroom.

But the planning, structuring and focusing may never go beyond the first day unless the teacher knows what is happening to the children. In evaluating their growth and progress, all that she has learned about child development and the changing nature of knowledge must come into play.

Evaluation Is Part Of The Role

The teacher in the open classroom must be able to assess the development of the children she teaches along many dimensions--academic ones, of course, but also on social, emotional, and physical aspects of growth. We know now that feelings, physical competency, and social adeptness all facilitate or interfere with academic learning. The teacher must know the learning styles that are characteristic of the children she teaches and the quality of their interaction with others, herself included. She must also know what they come to school with in the way of total life experience and what they are interested in.

Thus, evaluation in the open classroom begins and continues with the teacher's perceptions, not with scores on standardized tests. Records of children's total responses become the basis for assessing a child, with scores a small and quite underemphasized part of that total. We know that tests lend themselves peculiarly well to superficial assessment and distract a teacher from careful diagnosis because

they become so easily a way of passing judgement. They are no replacement for the observations and records of a teacher who values all aspects of a child's struggle to grow, indeed recognizes that true learning is struggle, and can relate one piece of a child's behavior to another so that what he does makes sense, whether she approves of it or not.

In this way, the process of a child's learning is evaluated, and not only the end product. How does a child work? What stymies him? What interests him? What does he need to accomplish purposes set by the child, by the teacher, or by the child and teacher together? These are far more important questions than "What is his test score?"

In an open classroom, children are helped to participate in setting their goals, and they may need help to hold to them. They must learn to complete what they start, not because they would otherwise be lazy, unproductive children, but because learning to persist and to become responsible for one's own learning is a necessary developmental task of childhood. We must assume that a normal human being enjoys being competent. It makes him feel good. But becoming competent is often a struggle, and if a child is not able to experience competency, there must be reasons. A teacher's unbiased observation and records without value judgment lead her to the only step for which evaluation must be made, that is, to question what might be the reasons for the interference with growth and learning and what might an adult do to support growth and learning.

Looking for the strengths of a child even as one observes the weaknesses, the teacher seeks ways of using a child's strengths to help him tackle his weaknesses. A mind open to learning and a spirit open to growth are far more important goals for the elementary school child than a series of scores that compare a child with all other children in an artficial distribution of placement around a mean that distorts the purposes of learning to begin with.

## The School Must Be A Community

And finally, the role of the teacher involves interaction with colleagues in establishing a school climate of which her class is a part. With other teachers, she searches for better understanding of children and curriculum to create a total setting of openness in which all can function. As the staff support each other, so each teacher can better support each child.

A new mode of thinking is called for in the informal or open classroom, a mode that recognizes the complexity of life and the complexity of the human struggle to cope. As a partner with children in a common striving to learn, the role of the teacher is to fulfill the human potential of the children. And she does this best as she fulfills her own potential for openness to people and openness to ideas.